



# KEITH OF THE BORDER

A TALE OF THE PLAINS

By RANDALL DARRISH

Author of MY LADY OF THE SOUTH WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING ETC.

Illustrations by DEARBORN MEYER

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## CHAPTER I.

### The Plainsman.

The man was riding just below the summit of the ridge, occasionally lifting his head so as to gaze across the crest, shading his eyes with one hand, to thus better concentrate his vision. Both horse and rider plainly exhibited signs of weariness, but every movement of the latter showed ceaseless vigilance, his glance roaming the barren ridges, a brown Winchester lying cocked across the saddle pommel, his left hand taut on the rein. Yet the horse he bestrode scarcely required restraint, advancing slowly, with head hanging low, and only occasionally breaking into a brief trot under the impetus of the spur.

The rider was a man approaching thirty, somewhat slender and long of limb, but possessing broad, squared shoulders above a deep chest, sitting the saddle easily in plainsman fashion, yet with an erectness of carriage which suggested military training. The face under the wide brim of the weather-worn slouch hat was clean-shaven, browned by sun and wind, and strongly marked, the chin slightly prominent, the mouth firm, the gray eyes full of character and daring. His dress was that of rough service, plain leather "chaps," showing marks of hard usage, a gray woolen shirt turned low at the neck, with a kerchief knotted loosely about the snowy bronzed throat. At one hip dangled the holster of a "forty-five," on the other hung a canvas-covered canteen. His was figure and face to be noted anywhere, a man from whom you would expect both thought and action, and one who seemed to exactly fit into his wild environment.

Where he rode was the very western extreme of the prairie country, billowed like the sea, and from off the crest of its higher ridges, the wide level sweep of the plains was visible, extending like a vast brown ocean to the foothills of the far-away mountains. Yet the actual commencement of that drear, barren expanse was fully ten miles distant, while all about where he rode the conformation was irregular, comprising narrow valleys and swelling mounds, with here and there a sharp ravine, riven from the rock and invisible until one drew up startled at its very brink. The general trend of depression was undoubtedly southward leading toward the valley of the Arkansas, yet irregular ridges occasionally cut across, adding to the confusion. The entire surrounding landscape presented the same aspect, with no special object upon which the eye could rest for guidance—no tree, no upheaval of rock, no peculiarity of summit, no snake-like trail—all about extended the same dull, dead monotony of brown, sun-baked hills, with slightly greener depressions lying between, interspersed by patches of sand or the white gleam of alkali. It was a dreary, deserted land, parched under the hot summer sun, brightened by no vegetation, excepting sparse bunches of buffalo grass or an occasional stunted sage bush, and disclosing nowhere the slightest sign of human habitation.

The rising sun reddened the crest of the hills, and the rider, baiting his willing horse, sat motionless, gazing steadily into the southwest. Apparently he perceived nothing there unusual, for he slowly turned his body about in the saddle, sweeping his eyes, inch by inch, along the line of the horizon, until the entire circuit had been completed. Then his compressed lips smiled slightly, his hand unconsciously patting the horse's neck.

"I reckon we're still alone, old girl," he said quietly, a bit of Southern drawl in the voice. "We'll try for the trail and take it easy."

He swung stiffly out of the saddle, and with reins dangling over his shoulder, began the slower advance on foot, the exhausted horse trailing behind. His was not a situation in which one could feel certain of safety, for any ridge might conceal the wary foe whom he sought to avoid, yet he proceeded now with renewed confidence. It was the summer of 1868, and the place the very heart of the Indian country, with every separate tribe ranging between the Yellowstone and the Brazos, either restless or openly on the war-path. Rumors of atrocities were being retold the length and breadth of the border, and every report drifting in to either fort or settlement only added to the alarm. For once at least the Plains Indians had discovered a common cause, tribal differences had been adjusted in war against the white invaders, and Kiowa, Comanches, Arapahoes, Cheyennes and Sioux had become welded together in savage brotherhood. To oppose them were the scattered and unorganized settlers lining the more eastern streams, guarded by small detachments of regular troops posted here and there amid that terror which scarcely within touch of the

patrol wandered roaming war parties, attacking travelers on the trails, raiding exposed settlements, and occasionally venturing to try open battle with the small squads of armed men. In this stress of sudden emergency—every available soldier on active duty—civilians had been pressed into service, and hastily despatched to warn exposed settlers, guide wagon trains, or carry despatches between outposts. And thus our rider, Jack Keith, who knew every foot of the plains lying between the Republican and the Canadian rivers, was one of these thus suddenly requisitioned, merely because he chanced to be discovered unemployed by the harassed commander of a cantonment just without the environs of Carson City. Twenty minutes later he was riding swiftly into the northwest, bearing important news to General Sheridan, commander of the Department, who happened at that moment to be at Fort Cairnes. To Keith this had been merely another page in a career of adventure; for him to take his life in his hands had long ago become an old story. He had quietly performed the special duty allotted him, watched a squadron of troopers trot forth down the valley of the Republican, received the hasty thanks of the peppery little general, and then, having nothing better to do, traded his horse in at the government corral for a fresh mount and started back again for Carson City. For the greater portion of two nights and a day he had been in the saddle, but he was accustomed to this, for he had driven more than one bunch of longhorns up the Texas trail, and as he had slept three hours at Cairnes, and as his nerves were like steel, the thought of danger gave him slight concern. He was thoroughly tired, and it rested him to get out of the saddle, while the freshness of the morning air was a tonic, the very breath of which made him forgetful of fatigue.

After all, this was indeed the very sort of experience which appealed to him, and always had—this life of peril in the open, under the stars and the sky. He had constantly experienced it for so long now, eight years, as to make it seem merely natural. While he ploughed steadily forward through the shifting sand of the coulee, his thought drifted idly back over those years, and sometimes he smiled, and occasionally frowned, as various incidents returned to memory. It had been a rough life, yet one not unusual to those of his generation. Born of excellent family in Tidewater Virginia, his father a successful planter, his mother had died while he was still in early boyhood, and he had grown up out of from all womanly influence. He had barely attained his majority, a senior at William and Mary's College, when the Civil War came; and one month after Virginia cast in her lot with the South, he became a sergeant in a cavalry regiment commanded by his father. He had enjoyed that life and won his spurs, yet it had cost. There was much not over-pleasant to remember, and those strenuous years of almost ceaseless fighting, of long night marches, of swift, merciless raiding, of lonely scouting within the enemy's lines, of severe wounds, hardship and suffering, had left their marks on both body and soul. His father had fallen on the field at Antietam, and left him utterly alone in the world, but he had fought on grimly to the end, until the last flag of the Confederacy had been furled. By that time, upon the collar of his tattered gray jacket appeared the tarnished insignia of a captain. The quick tears dimmed his eyes even now as he recalled again that final parting following Appomattox; the battle-worn faces of his men, and his own painful journey homeward, defeated, wounded and penniless. It was no home when he got there, only a heap of ashes and a few weed-grown acres. No familiar face greeted him; not even a slave was left.

He had honestly endeavored to remain there, to face the future and work it out alone; he persuaded himself to feel that this was his paramount duty to the state, to the memory of the dead. But those very years of army life made such a task impossible; the dull, dead monotony of routine, the loneliness, the slovenliness of results, became intolerable. As it came to thousands of his comrades, the call of the West came to him, and at last he yielded, and drifted toward the frontier. The life there fascinated him, drawing him deeper and deeper into its swirling vortex. He became freighter, mail carrier, hunter, government scout, cowboy, foreman. Once he had drifted into the mountains, and took a chance in the mines, but the wide plains called him back once more to their desert loneliness. What an utter waste it all seemed, now that he looked back upon it. Eight years of fighting, hardship and rough living, and what had they brought him? The reputation of a hard rider, a daring player at cards, a quick shot, a scorner of danger, and a bad man to fool with—that was the whole of a record hardly won. The

man's eyes hardened, his lips set firmly, as this truth came crushing home. A pretty life story surely, one to be proud of, and with probably no better ending than an Indian bullet, or the flash of a revolver in some barroom fight.

The narrow valley along which he was traveling suddenly changed its direction, compelling him to climb the rise of the ridge. Slightly below the summit he halted. In front extended the wide expanse of the Arkansas valley, a scene of splendor under the golden rays of the sun, with vivid contrast of colors, the gray of rocks, the yellow of sand, the brown of distant hills, the green of vegetation, and the silver sheen of the stream half hidden behind the fringe of cottonwoods lining its banks. This was a sight Keith had often looked upon, but always with appreciation, and for the moment his eyes swept across from bluff to bluff without thought except for its wild beauty. Then he perceived something which instantly startled him into attention—yonder, close beside the river, just beyond that rugged bunch of cottonwoods, slender spirals of blue smoke were visible. That would hardly be a camp of freighters at this hour of the day, and besides, the Santa Fe trail along here ran close in against the bluff, coming down to the river at the ford two miles further west. No party of plainsmen would ever venture to build a fire in so exposed a spot, and no small company would take the chances of the trail. But surely that appeared to be the flap of a canvas wagon top a little to the right of the smoke, yet all was so far away he could not be certain. He stared in that direction a long while, shading his eyes with both hands, unable to decide. There were three or four moving black dots higher up the river, but so far away he could not distinguish whether men or animals. Only as outlined against the yellow sand dunes could he tell they were advancing westward toward the ford.

Decidedly puzzled by all this, yet determined to solve the mystery and unwilling to remain hidden there until night, Keith led his horse along the slant of the ridge, until he attained a



Slender Spirals of Blue Smoke Were Visible.

sharp break through the bluff leading down into the valley. It was a rugged gash, nearly impassable, but a half hour of toil won them the lower prairie, the winding path preventing the slightest view of what might be meanwhile transpiring below. Once safely out in the valley the river could no longer be seen, while barely a hundred yards away, winding along like a great serpent, ran the deeply rutted trail to Santa Fe. In neither direction appeared any sign of human life. As near as he could determine from those distant cottonwoods outlined against the sky, the smoke spirals were too thin by then to be observed, the spot sought must be considerably to the right of where he had emerged. With this idea in mind he advanced cautiously, his every sense alert, searching anxiously for fresh signs of passage or evidence of a wagon train having deserted the beaten track, and turned south. The trail itself, dustless and packed hard, revealed nothing, but some five hundred

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yards beyond the ravine he discovered what he sought—here two wagons had turned sharply to the left, their wheels cutting deeply enough into the prairie sod to show them heavily laden. With the experience of the border he was able to determine that these wagons were drawn by mules, two span of each, their small hoofs clearly defined on the turf, and that they were being driven rapidly, on a sharp trot as they turned, and then, a hundred feet further, at a slashing gallop. Just outside their trail appeared the marks of a galloping horse. A few rods farther along Keith came to a confused blur of pony tracks sweeping in from the east, and the whole story of the chase was revealed as though he had witnessed it with his own eyes. They must have been crazy, or else impelled by some grave necessity, to venture along this trail in so small a party. And they were traveling west—west! Keith drew a deep breath, and swore to himself, "Of all the blame fools!"

He perceived the picture in all its gruesome details—the two mule-drawn wagons moving slowly along the trail in the early morning; the band of hostile Indians suddenly swooping out from some obscure hiding place in the bluffs; the discovery of their presence; the desperate effort at escape; the swerving from the open trail in vain hope of reaching the river and finding protection underneath its banks; the frightened mules galloping wildly, lashed into a

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